The Journal of Baroque Studies

International Institute for Baroque Studies
University of Malta

L-Università ta' Malta

Number 04
Volume 02

2020

Written Fragments of a Dispute: Enclosing Monastic Spaces in Early Modern Malta

Petra Caruana Dingli – University of Malta

The number of young women who joined monasteries rose rapidly during the years of the Catholic Reformation. At the same time, Tridentine reforms led to stricter precepts on cloistered life for women, reducing their opportunities for contact with the outside world and enclosing them more tightly together within monasteries.

Female paradigms of gender and images of womanhood in early modern society are reflected in the reform of monastic life throughout seventeenth-century Europe. In both social and religious life, nuns embodied the idealised feminine virtues of perfect chastity, silence and absolute obedience to the dominant patriarchy. To ensure that this cherished ideal was upheld for all to respect and admire, increasingly stringent controls over the lives of cloistered nuns were applied. This was underpinned by the supposed weakness and vulnerability of the female sex.

Despite these strict rules, nuns always maintained contact with the outside world. Female monasteries still had to depend upon, and interact with, men in their spiritual and religious life. Male clerics were paid by nuns to hear confession, to celebrate mass and to administer the sacraments, including communion and giving the last rites.

This article examines the written fragments of a dispute of the 1620s between a group of nuns at St Peter's Monastery in Mdina,

Malta, and a priest who served their monastery. Oppositions in male-female relations were intensified by the shift towards stricter monastic enclosure, as was then being insisted upon by the Maltese episcopal authorities in line with the Catholic Reformation. This was aggravated by the concurrent steep rise in the number of women enclosed in the confined spaces of this Benedictine monastery in the early seventeenth century.

Fiona J. Griffiths observes that male clergymen serving nuns in the medieval and early modern periods often 'faced ridicule, censure, skepticism, and accusations of wrong doing in their spiritual service to women'.[1] These were the so-called 'nuns' priests', as described in medieval England in the *Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400). She seeks to uncover why, in these circumstances, priests would risk the 'alleged dangers and temptations of contact with women in order to provide nuns with spiritual care and support'. Griffiths notes that a significant challenge in this task is that 'few are known by name and fewer still recorded their thoughts and experiences in writing' and they 'rarely left a mark on the historic record, appearing primarily as caricatures in the insinuations and accusations of their critics'.[2] Moreover; she notes that:

> Men's contact with women within the religious life appears in both medieval and modern accounts as dangerous, controversial, suspect, and fraught. Restrictions on the types of men who could theoretically be chosen to care for women (old men, and of good repute) and on their access to the female cloister (limited, and in the company of witnesses) suggest a medieval climate of suspicion and anxiety concerning contact between the sexes within the religious life.[3]

1 Fiona J. Griffiths, *Nuns' Priests' Tales: Men and Salvation in Medieval Women's Monastic Life* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 7.

2 Ibid., 5, 33.

3 Ibid., 16.

Confessors were usually appointed for two or three-year periods. The difficulty in finding suitable priests willing to take on this role is reflected in a plea by the Bishop of Spoleto, who in 1633 requested permission from the Vatican to reappoint confessors at nunneries for an additional three years, if a situation was working out smoothly.[4]

Enclosure

Enclosure, or *clausura*, was an important priority for the Catholic Church in the post-Tridentine reform of female monasteries. As observed by Mario Rosa[5], this was enforced with increasingly strict discipline in the seventeenth century, with tight controls over any persons, especially men, who might need to enter a monastery for a variety of reasons. These included chaplains and confessors, procurators and book-keepers, architects and masons, artisans and manual labourers, musicians, and music or singing teachers. Rosa notes that:

> The dominant idea behind this overall process of control, which was assimilated into a continual striving for self-discipline, was the male and clerical notion (reinforced by the Counter-Reformation) of the weakness and fragility of women and their need for guidance, in combination with a genuine obsession with female chastity. Indeed, the seventeenth-century 'reforms' put much more stress on the vow of chastity than on vows of poverty and obedience, and female monastic establishments were generally regarded as places more for the conservation of virtue than for the practice of sanctity.[6]

4 Archivio Segreto del Vaticano (ASV), Sagra Congregazione dei Vescovi e Regolari (Congr. Vescovi Regolari), Positiones Monialium (Pos. Monial.) (17 Jan. 1633), unpaginated.

5 Mario Rosa, 'The Nun'. In *Baroque Personae*, ed. by Rosario Villari, trans. by Lydia Cochrane (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 198.

6 Ibid., 201.

Tridentine reforms were also gradually being introduced in Malta.[7] In 1575 the nuns of St Peter's in Mdina were still attending early morning mass at the cathedral daily, outside the walls of the monastery, where they were able to speak to both male and female relatives. Except during special periods such as Advent or Lent, they could occasionally visit their parents or relatives, even staying away from the monastery for a few days at a time. But major changes to their lifestyle were introduced over the next decades. Following his pastoral visit to the monastery in 1575, Bishop Pietro Dusina forbade the nuns from hearing mass outside their cloister, and they could only see their relatives in church or visit their relatives at home for exceptional reasons.[8]

On 22 November 1616 the bishop of Malta, Baldassare Cagliares[9], published an edict on communication with cloistered nuns in Malta,[10] citing a papal bull of 1590 by Pope Sixtus V. Cagliares declared that speaking to cloistered nuns without the written permission of the bishop of the diocese, risked excommunication. He instructed that this order should be affixed outside the parlour (*parlatorio*) of all monasteries in his diocese, and that a copy was to be kept by the nuns who supervised the gates and parlours (*gradiere*). As noted by Silvia Evangelisti, all over Europe:

> Tough penalties were prescribed for all those who transgressed the strict cloister rules: excommunication for outsiders, and suspensions from the offices, or even prison, for nuns ...

7 The implementation and negotiation of Tridentine reforms at the monastery of St Mary Magdalene in Valletta, is examined in Christine Muscat, 'The Magdelene Monastery, Valletta in the Age of the Counter Reformation: Attitudes, Action and Negotiation'. In *The Journal of Baroque Studies*, 2 no. 2 (2018), 63-84.

8 Carmel Cassar, *Daughters of Eve: Women, Gender Roles, and the Impact of the Council of Trent in Catholic Malta* (Msida, Malta: Mireva, 2002), 190-91.

9 Baldassare Cagliares (1575-1633) was the only prelate of Maltese descent appointed as bishop of the Maltese diocese by the Order of St John, who ruled the island from 1530 until the end of the eighteenth century. Cagliares held this position from 14 December 1615 until his death on 4 August 1633.

10 Archiepiscopal Archives of Malta (AAM), Acta Civilia IV (1615-1618), ff. 52-53.

> Tridentine restrictions envisaged strict control over the direct contacts that nuns maintained with outsiders, during their time spent in the parlour. A rigid system of licences limited access for visitors. The bishop, and no one else, could grant these licences, and only to very few people, such as the nuns' relatives and acquaintances, doctors, friars, and convent workers.[11]

The enforcement of stricter enclosure after the Council of Trent affected the way in which nuns organised their daily lives, as well as the construction or modification of monastery buildings in early modern Europe. Internal choirs were firmly screened off and iron grates were installed on confession windows within the chapels and parlours of nunneries. This was also the direction followed in Malta.

In the modifications to the chapel and choir of the monastery of St Peter in Mdina in the 1620s, new iron grates, locks and hinges were inserted. New metalwork was also added to the rotating shelf (*rota*) used to exchange items like food or gifts with the nuns while avoiding physical contact with outsiders.[12] This reflects the changes being introduced at this monastery following Tridentine reforms.

The expansion in the number of nuns at St Peter's during the first decades of the seventeenth century was also in line with trends in female monasteries in Sicily and Italy. A growing community of nuns meant, however, that their living conditions became more crowded. This pressure, in parallel with more restrictive and rigid enclosure, precipitated tensions between the nuns and the male clerics they interacted with.

By 1620 the nuns in Mdina were resisting the entry of new novices at the monastery, complaining that no limit had been set for the number of women that their community could absorb. To bolster

---

11 Silvia Evangelisti, *Nuns: A History of Convent Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 50-51.

12 Metropolitan Cathedral of Malta (MCM), Curia Episcopalis Melitensis (CEM), Acta Originalis (AO) 113, ff. 335r-36v. Expenses of metalwork carried out for the monastery of St Peter by Gaspare Farrugia and Michele Napolitano dated 27 November 1621.

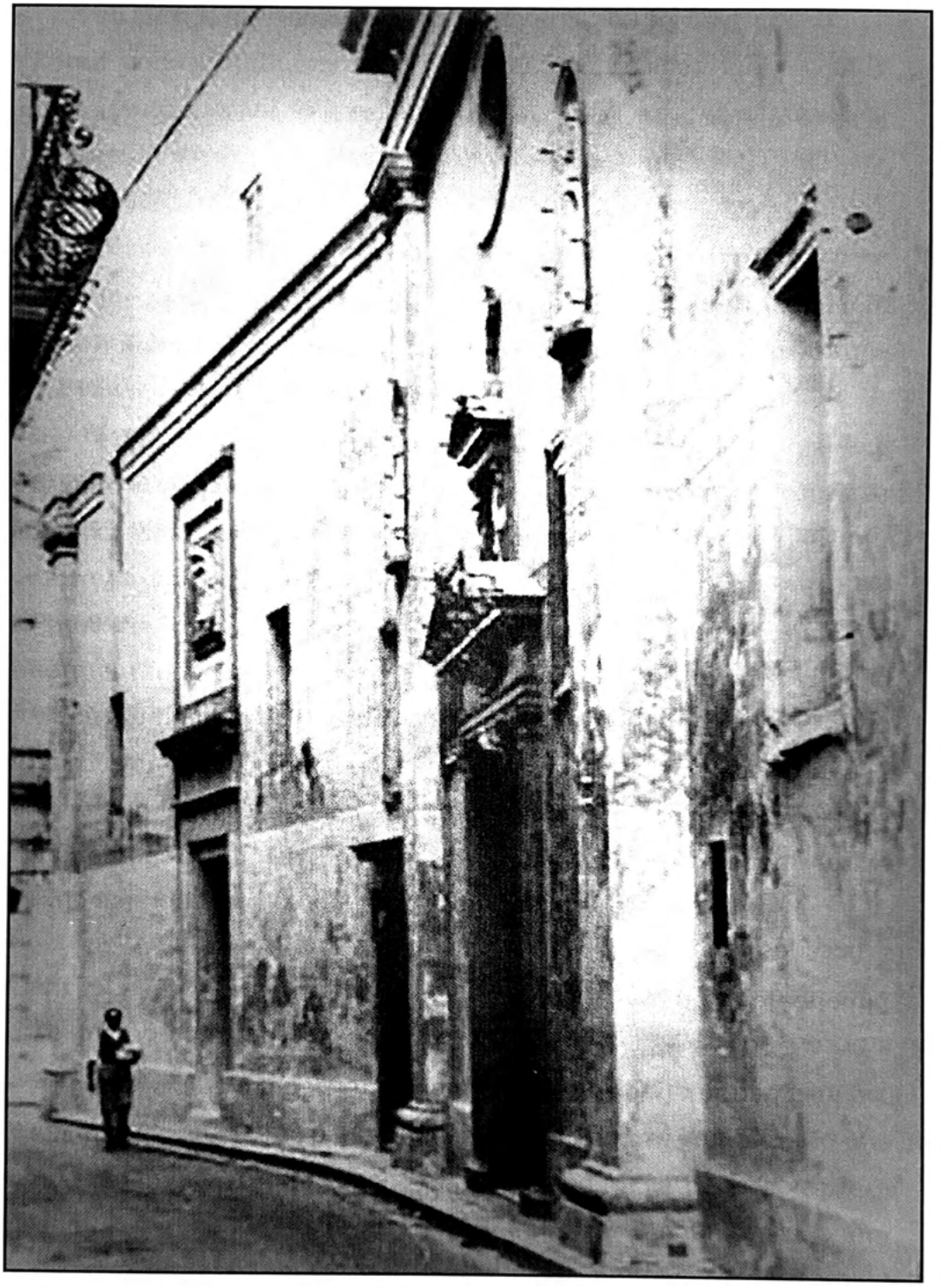

Figure 1: Monastery of St. Peter Mdina.

their case with the episcopal authorities, they described their living conditions as being so dire that the monastery was becoming almost uninhabitable. They said that there was now only half a metre (two *palmi*) of distance between each bed in the dormitory, and that they

were deprived of space for an infirmary, a novice school, and other necessary offices. Besides novices and servants, there were thirty-two professed nuns living at the Mdina monastery at this time[13], compared to only fifteen nuns in 1575.

The physical size of the monastery was then considerably smaller than the property that exists in Mdina today. In 1620 the monastery's procurator, the lawyer-priest Nicola Mangion, represented the nuns as their procurator in the purchase of an adjoining shop (*bottega*), in order to expand the site and build new offices (*officine*) and other rooms for the nuns.[14] As mentioned above, he also supervised the installation of new grates and metalwork in the chapel.

Nicola Mangion

In 1617, Nicola Mangion (1586-1656) was appointed chaplain of the monastery of St Peter in Mdina by Bishop Cagliares, and on 25 December 1619 Mangion also took on the role of procurator at the monastery.[15] Notarial documents show that Mangion routinely represented the nuns in their financial transactions, including sales and purchases of property, as part of his duties. He also kept the monthly accounts of the monastery, recording both daily and extraordinary expenses. Besides being a priest, Mangion was trained as a lawyer and his family home was in the village of Naxxar a few kilometres away from Mdina.[16] By the end of 1623, Mangion had been replaced as chaplain and procurator of the nuns of St Peter's.[17]

After Mangion's term at the monastery had ended, tensions simmered between him and the nuns. A set of statements by four nuns, given to the episcopal authorities on 6 October 1624, outlined the

13 AAM, Processi (1621), unpaginated.

14 Notarial Archives of Valletta (NAV), Notary Mario Attard, R28/8, ff. 544v-548v.

15 Monastery of St Peter (MSP), Sezione Amministrativa (Sez. Amm.), A/2, f. 34r.

16 Naxxar had a population of around 1,500 persons at this period. See Paul Catania, *The People of the North 1546-1610* (St Venera, Malta: Midsea Books, 2015), 5.

17 Nicola Mangion was still procurator in November 1623, but by January 1624 the priest Simone Pace held this position. See MSP, Sez. Amm., A/2, f. 33r.

roles that Mangion had carried out at the monastery and the payments which he had received.[18] The following day, four priests also gave their statements to the bishop's representative, describing their former roles as ordinary or extraordinary confessors at the monastery during the previous year.[19]

While this trouble was brewing, in early 1625 Mangion's own sentiments towards the nuns still appear to have been reasonably tranquil. In a will he drew up at a notary in March, he bequeathed 6 *uncie* to the nuns of St Peter's and 4 *uncie* to the nuns of St Mary Magdalene in Valletta. He also left a small legacy to Theodora Borg, a nun in Mdina who he refers to as his relative (*nipota*).[20]

Tensions between the nuns of St Peter's and their former chaplain continued to escalate. On 20 June 1625 Nicola Mangion was arrested by the bishop. He spent twenty days in the episcopal prison, where he claimed to have been maltreated,[21] and was released and placed under house arrest at his home in Naxxar. After paying 100 *scudi* to the bishop as a form of security, by August he was in Rome petitioning the Vatican and proclaiming his innocence. He claimed that Cagliares harboured a strong personal hatred (*odio*) for him, and said that the accusations against him involving the monastery were unfair and fabricated. The issue continued until the matter was decided and resolved by the Vatican in 1626. Mangion spent over nine months in Rome on this case, until he felt reassured that he could travel back to Malta safely.[22]

---

18 MCM, CEM, AO 119, ff. 183r-185v. These were the abbess Imperia Fenech, her deputy (*vicaria*) Marietta Ferriolo, and the nuns Francesca Attard and Giustina Castelletti.

19 MCM, CEM, AO 119, ff. 185r-185v. These four priests were Matteo Mamo, Matteo dello Re, Giovanni Emanuel and Luca Schembri.

20 NAV, Notary Mario Attard, R28/13, ff. 648r-653v. This deed is dated 15 March 1624 *ab incarnatione*. In line with this calendar, the new year 1625 began on 25 March.

21 Ibid., ff. 1001v-1003v. Testimonies dated 1 August 1635 by Giovanni Mifsud, Gieronimo Mifsud and Nicola Mangion's nephew, Giovanni Mangion.

22 In 1628 Nicola Mangion was appointed the first commissioner in Malta of the Reverenda Fabbrica di San Pietro. See Mario Gauci, 'L'archivio dell'inquisizione di Malta (1541-1798): un patrimonio di documenti che arricchisce la storia di Malta e il suo contesto mediterraneo'. In Alejandro Cifres, ed., *L'inquisizione romana e i*

An unauthorised confession

The crux of the dispute between the nuns of St Peter's and their confessor revolves around an incident which occurred in late 1623. At that time Mangion was not the nun's confessor, but their procurator. One afternoon he was in the yard (*cortiglio*) of the monastery overseeing some manual work being carried out by labourers. Four men were carrying away some dung and hay from an external room behind the monastery chapel. Another two men slaughtered and dissected one of the monastery's four pigs, and the nuns took this meat away into their kitchen.[23]

While this work was going on, three or four nuns repeatedly approached Mangion and urged him to go inside the monastery and hear the confession of the abbess, who was gravely ill. It was almost nightfall and their official confessor was elsewhere, and they feared that the abbess might die soon. After several unsuccessful attempts to persuade him to do this, Mangion agreed and went inside the building to hear the confession of the abbess.

A set of testimonies defending Mangion's behaviour in this incident were given to a notary in December 1625. The monastery doctor and an apothecary[24] confirmed that the abbess had been seriously ill. The labourers who were present that day emphasised that it was never the practice for anyone to get written permission to enter the monastery, not even the chaplain, the doctor or surgeon. They confirmed that they had witnessed Mangion trying to refuse the nuns who wanted him to hear the confession of the abbess, telling them to wait for their

---

suoi archivi: a vent'anni dall'apertura dell'ACDF, (Rome: Gangemi editore, 2019), 443-68.

23 Giorgio Sammut, Marco Cauchi, Giulio Agius and Blasio Vella of Naxxar, Giovanni Mifsud of Gharghur, and Pietro Aquilina of Rabat.

24 Physician (*medico*) Nicola Saura and apothecary (*aromatorio*) Mauro Leocata. Saura is remembered for his legacy of 1654 founding the first private charitable institution for the aged and infirm in Malta, later known as Saura Hospital in Rabat. See Paul Cassar, *Medical History of Malta* (London: Wellcome Historical Medical Library, 1964), 381-82. Leocata was an apothecary at Santo Spirito Hospital in Rabat.

confessor Luca Schembri. Eventually he had relented as it was getting late and their confessor would no longer be allowed into the monastery after dark. He went into the monastery building accompanied by some nuns, and exited soon afterwards accompanied by the same nuns. One labourer stressed that the abbess was so ill that he slaughtered only one pig instead of all four pigs in the shed, to minimise the disturbing noise.

Considering the crowded spaces in which these thirty-two nuns were living at the time, it is highly unlikely that Mangion had the opportunity for any improper behaviour. The only secluded, private time might have been during the act of confession itself. The witnesses stressed that Mangion was always accompanied by several nuns, implying that no boundaries of control over these highly protected women had been transgressed. The feminine ideals of chastity and obedience which the nuns embodied had been respected and safeguarded.

Yet if Nicola Mangion was then not the official confessor of the monastery, and not authorised as such by the bishop, then hearing the confession of a nun could have been a significant and serious transgression in itself. The testimonies therefore all emphasise the fact that the ordinary confessor was not available and that the abbess was perceived to be on her death bed. The abbess in question was Vincenza Scicluna. She evidently recovered her health after this incident, as she died over ten years later.

Two disobedient nuns

In December 1625, Bishop Cagliares went to the monastery in Mdina to oversee the election procedure of a new abbess. Two of the nuns refused to come to the parlour. When asked where they were, the other nuns giggled. Cagliares was incensed and wrote to Rome to complain. He asked the *Sacra Congregazione dei Vescovi e Regolari* (Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars) to guide him on how these disobedient nuns of St Peter's should be governed, particularly Vincenza and Ubaldesca. These two nuns were not only continuing with their stubborn wilfulness, he wrote, but day by day they were causing

greater unrest at the monastery and scandalising the population.[25] One of the two unruly nuns on this occasion, Vincenza, was the same former abbess whose confession Mangion had been persuaded to hear on that ill-fated day when he was overseeing workmen in the monastery yard.

As revealed in these documents, in their relatively small yet consequential actions, these two women, Vincenza Scicluna and Ubaldesca Menardi, were resisting the church authorities. They refused to obey instructions to come to the parlour, at a period when the bishop was attempting to impose increasingly strict controls over their female community, and when the nuns were complaining that the spaces in which they were being confined were cramped and inadequate.

The reputation of a monastery was, of course, also important to maintain its standing within the community. A bad name or dishonour could have a material impact on the nuns, as people would be less likely to provide financial support or send their daughters to a monastery of dubious repute.

A call for attention?

At one point, this narrative deviates into the supernatural. A few days after Nicola Mangion's arrest, five Mdina nuns testified before a representative of the bishop.[26] They related that, after some initial tranquil months acting as the chaplain of their monastery, Mangion became angry with some of the nuns. They said that he had called former abbesses of the monastery 'whores and servants of the devil' (*puttane e ruffiane del demonio/diavolo*). He called other nuns 'hunting dogs' (*cane di caccia*) and 'dishonest' names. They pointed out that he had especially singled out a particular nun, Marietta Ferriolo, as the target of his anger.

These five statements are short and almost identical. They are all written down by the same hand, presumably that of a male official or

25 ASV, Congr. Vescovi Regolari, Pos. Monial. (Jan. 1626), unpaginated.

26 These five nuns were Aloisietta Bonaventura de Bonetijs, Veridiana Bezzina, Clara Muscat, Laurencia Delucia and Isabellica Gauci.

scribe.[27] The similarity of the accounts suggests that the points presented were carefully chosen. As in any narrative, the details are selected and framed to achieve a particular effect. Natalie Zenon Davies observes that in historical texts, as in fictional narratives, the 'shaping choices of language, detail, and order are needed to present an account that seems to both writer and reader true, real, meaningful, and/or explanatory.'[28] Diane Purkiss[29] notes that history is nearly always an encounter with a text. Besides what is being said, the way in which things are said is important too. Non-literary texts also use rhetorical devices, and every text is crafted in a particular form to create the desired meanings. The reader questions not only what is being said, but who is saying it, to whom, and why.[30]

The framing of Mangion's accusations as being directed at a group of nuns, rather than at an individual woman, is also resonant with meaning and contextual significance. Stephens observes that in the early seventeenth century a wave of group or 'mass' demonic possessions spread across Europe. These outbreaks often involved women in religious communities, particularly Catholic nuns, such as the famous cases in France, at Loudon in the 1630s and Louviers in 1647.[31] This well-known incident at Loudon was based on the accusation that their confessor, the priest Urbain Grandier, had a pact with the devil and drove the nuns to become possessed by demons. Grandier was tried and found guilty, and executed in 1634.

In his seminal study on this famous case in Loudon, Michel Certeau notes the symmetries which exist between mysticism and possession, 'the immediacy of a diabolical seizure and the immediacy of a divine illumination'. The most famous of the possessed nuns at

27 MCM, CEM, AO 119, ff. 486r-489r.

28 Natalie Zemon Davies, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1987), 3.

29 Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (London: Routledge, 2013), 71.

30 Frans Ciappara, *Conversion Narratives and the Roman Inquisition in Malta, 1650-1700.* In *Journal of Religious History* 40, no. 4 (2016), 508-24.

31 Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 347.

Loudon, Jeanne des Anges, later assumed the persona of a 'mystic visionary'. According to Certeau:

> From this perspective there is a complicity and, to borrow a phrase from William Blake, 'a marriage of heaven and hell.' This is a characteristic trait of possession, which coincides with one of the themes of baroque art – metamorphosis. The instability of the characters, the reversals of experience, the uncertainty of limits, indicate the mutation of a mental universe.'[32]

There is no evidence that any such notable group incident was connected to the Mdina nuns of St Peter's, but these women, and the episcopal authorities who wrote down their testimonies, acted in this context.

The allegations in the five statements by the nuns of St Peter's shed light on the construction of gender paradigms by both women and men at this period. Women were subdued under the authority of the patriarchal family, the church, and God the father. They were, however, considered to be fragile, more imaginative and less judicious than men, and easily led astray. Demons were therefore believed more likely to seduce the thoughts and imaginations of women than those of men.

These five nuns related that Mangion had accused them of being the 'whores of the devil' (*puttane del demonio*). The figure of the nun embodied an extreme ideal of feminine chastity, silence, obedience and holiness. The image of the whore embodied the opposite of this ideal, with attributes of sexual deviance, disobedience and sin, and lay at the other end of the spectrum of contrasting figures. These strong, opposing gender types also provide some insight into why demons were more linked to female rather than to male religious communities.

Sluhovsky highlights that, barring a few exceptions, almost all group 'possessions' involved religious women, and that such events 'shed light on a religious behaviour that was uniquely feminine and

32 Michel de Certau, *The Possession at Loudun*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 7.

should be explained in gender terms'.[33] He also emphasises that such occurrences were common enough to often go relatively unnoticed:

> It is crucially important to note that most of the reported cases remained hidden in monastic chronicles and inquisitional records, and did not attract much attention at the time or since ... In other words, contemporaries did not regard group possessions in convents as something so exceptional and dramatic that it necessitated a new theological (or medical) explanation. This was due, I believe, to their understanding of group possessions as just another manifestation of the very common phenomenon of diabolic possession of individuals. As such, both the diagnostic tools (discernment of spirits by abbesses, bishops and theologians), and the remedy (exorcism) were part and parcel of the traditional means that had been used by the church throughout its history.[34]

Possessions by divine or demonic spirits can be confused with cultural traditions of witchcraft and magic. In the early modern period, numerous group possessions took place in female religious congregations, however most cases had nothing to do with witchcraft accusations.[35] Sluhovsky also notes that, 'In demonic possession, evil spirits were assumed to inhabit a person against his or her will, while in witchcraft accusations, a human agent was accused of collaborating with the devil for the purpose of causing harm. This distinction became more and more blurred in cases of diabolic possessions of individuals in the second half of the sixteenth century'.[36]

Carmel Cassar stresses that belief in magic or supernatural phenomena were not necessarily understood as being opposed to one another, and that many people did not view witchcraft as being morally

33 Moshe Sluhovsky, 'The Devil in the Convent'. In *The American Historical Review*, 107 no. 5 (2002), 1381.

34 Ibid., 1385.

35 Ibid., 1380.

36 Ibid., 1386.

reprehensible – it could be used for good purposes, such as healing the sick, as well as for causing harm. While the Church did not accept any form of magic, since 'in the view of theologians, it required at least a tacit understanding with the devil', the general population did not take this view.[37]

Walter Stephens notes that, '*maleficia*, or acts of harmful magic, are the basis for any definition of witchcraft around the world; but demonolatory, the intentional worship of and subservience to demons, is particular to early-modern European witchcraft'.[38] He notes that it was towards the end of the sixteenth century, that demonic possession and witchcraft began to be linked.[39] According to Stephens:

> sexual relations with demons were conceptualized as the most common expression of demonolatory, or 'demonomania', as the jurist Jean Bodin called it in the late sixteenth century. Sexual submission to demons was defined as a ritual act, demonstrating the witch's servitude, in both body and soul, to the demonic familiar and to Satan, the archenemy of God.[40]

A case involving a nun at the Ursuline monastery in Valletta in 1646, illustrates similar beliefs. Despite strict enclosure at the monastery this young woman, Geltruda Cumbo Navarra, claimed to be pregnant. During the ensuing inquisitorial proceedings the claim was put forward that she had been impregnated by the devil. The *Suprema Sacra Congregazione del Sant' Officio* (Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Inquisition) in Rome wrote to the inquisitor in Malta, Giovanbattista Gori Panellini, stating that this was unlikely and that the human perpetrator should be punished.[41]

---

37 Cassar, *Daughters of Eve*, 112-13.

38 Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, 13.

39 Ibid., 346.

40 Ibid., 13.

41 MCM, Archivum Inquisitionis Melitensis (AIM), Corr. 8, ff. 159r-159v. Also see Frans Ciappara, *Society and the Inquisition in Early Modern Malta* (San Gwann, Malta: PEG, 2000), 408.

Carmel Cassar notes that in the early seventeenth century 'there appears to have been an upsurge in the number of those possessed by evil spirits (*spiritati*)' in Malta, and that this increase 'seems to imply a demand for attention and publicity'. He notes that persons who were said to be possessed were able to break taboos and 'give free expression to feelings and fantasies, in particular those which voiced resentment at various forms of discipline'.[42]

Moreover, Sluhovsky observes a pattern in early modern monasteries whereby problematic or restless behaviour among nuns, such as mass possessions, often occurred at times when Tridentine reforms and more rigid observance were being introduced, with all the tensions and divisions that this created. The families of nuns also had mixed responses to stricter enclosure in early seventeenth-century Western Europe, wanting to preserve the right to visit their daughters.[43]

In this context, growing tensions with their confessor drove the cloistered nuns of St Peter's to come forward with their statements on their alleged seduction by demons in 1625. What were they hoping to achieve? They were surely exposing themselves to potential scandal or gossip. On the other hand, being the target of attacks by the devil could also have a legitimising effect. It could show that the sanctity of the nuns was approved by God, and therefore undermined by Satan.

Why did such shameful and indecent accusations not remain buried within the walls of the monastery of St Peter's? In willingly coming forward to present themselves in this controversial light, the nuns were evidently demanding attention. Yet this aspect of the story fades into the background or, at least, no further documents have been identified. To date, the allegations of demonic idolatry or possession do not appear to have been alarming enough to warrant significant action by the Inquisitor or any other authority.

---

42 Cassar, *Daughters of Eve*, 143-45.

43 Sluhovsky, 'The Devil in the Convent', 1389-93, 1395.

Nuns and confessors

Nicola Mangion was one of numerous priests who ended up in difficult and complex situations at monasteries that they served. The Vatican archives abound with examples of nuns at Italian monasteries writing about their confessors in the seventeenth century. They would sometimes petition to have their confessor removed. For example, in the 1630s the nuns of Serra San Quirico in the diocese of Camerino in Italy requested that their confessor should not be reinstated. A monastery at Perugia complained to Rome about their confessor, who had allowed scandalous behaviour to take place in their *parlatorio* during the carnival festivities.[44]

On the other hand, others were pleased with their priests and wanted them to be reappointed. Examples here include the Benedictine nuns at Ruvo in Italy, who petitioned to retain their confessor Bernardo Fasulo, or the nuns of San Michele at Pescia and their confessor Domenico Fini, or the nuns of the Chiarito monastery in Florence and their confessor, 51-year-old Fra Giovanni Vincenzo *Hierosolimitano Nobile Dottore, e Theologo*. The nuns of Santa Maria Annunciata delle Turchine in Genova wrote to the Vatican requesting the reappointment of their extraordinary confessor, the Jesuit Giulio Pallavicino. The monastery of San Bernardino of Pistoia did the same for their confessor Francesco Villano, as did the nuns of Santa Maria del Giesu of Naples for their ordinary confessor Giovanni Battista Grande.[45]

Further instances of tensions between nuns and confessors in Malta at this period include Francesco Vinci, confessor of the monastery of St Mary Magdalene in Valletta, who in 1628 was accused of offensive behaviour with the nuns.[46] In another example, in 1699 Fortunata Gauci, a thirty-year-old nun of St Peter's in Mdina, visited the confessional (*confessionario*). She did not intend to give her confession, as she

44 ASV, Congr. Vescovi Regolari, Pos. Monial. (19 Nov. 1634; 26 Aug. 1633), unpaginated.

45 Ibid., (7 Jan. 1633; 14 Jan. 1633; 18 Nov. 1633; 19 May 1634), unpaginated.

46 MCM, AIM, Corr. 5, ff. 55r, 95r.

Figure 2: Chapel of St Peter's Monastery, Mdina

later explained, but just wanted to talk to the chaplain Giuseppe Fabri. During their conversation the priest expressed his fondness for her, and she took that to mean that he liked her in a 'dishonest' (*inhonesto*) way. The incident did not go further but she continued to worry about it, and five years later she reported the matter to the inquisitor's court 'to relieve her conscience'.[47]

In 1760, the confessor of the monastery of St Ursula in Valletta, Fr Stefano Dauphin, was accused of improper behaviour with the nuns.[48] Dauphin and the nuns could evidently look at one another through the grates. Closed confessional boxes first began to be introduced in churches in the late sixteenth century in Europe. They were first used in Milan and their use only spread gradually.

As Jaime Goodrich shows in the case of frictions between male ecclesiastical authority and the English Benedictine nunnery at Brussels in the 1620s, gender provided a 'means of understanding,

47 MCM, AIM, Corr. 17, ff. 218r-220r. On this case also see Frans Ciappara, *Society and the Inquisition*, 365.

48 MCM, AIM, Proc. 126A, ff. 175r-181v.

evaluating, and politicizing female piety', and 'of claiming moral authority and addressing larger concerns over monastic order and spiritual direction'.[49]

The role of priests and confessors could be a pivoting factor in such political manoeuvres at monasteries. The perils of traditional female weaknesses and vices loomed over their highly regulated interaction with religious women. Gender paradigms were applied in order to assert, as well as to resist, male authority over women.

Conclusion

Confessors played important roles in the lives of both lay and religious women in the early modern period.[50] Cassar suggests that 'regular confession may have helped women to gain some knowledge of themselves and helped to shape their capacities for thought'.[51] In the case of nuns, the confessor was at times the only man with whom they were allowed to have regular contact. In addition, they were expected to divulge their most intimate thoughts to this man, and to fully accept his spiritual guidance.

Such interactions presented a potential emotional and political minefield. The dispute between the nuns of St Peter's and their chaplain Nicola Mangion in the 1620s illustrates that while such male-female relationships were permitted to bypass the boundaries of social norms, yet they always hovered precariously around the sensitivity of gender paradigms and ideals.

Patterns have been observed in early modern monasteries whereby problematic or restless behaviour among nuns often occurred

49 Jaime Goodrich, 'Authority, Gender and Monastic Piety: Controversies at the English Benedictine Convent in Brussels, 1620-1623'. In *British Catholic History*, 33 no. 1 (2016), 91-114.

50 See Rudolph M. Bell, 'Telling Her Sins: Male Confessors and Female Penitents in Catholic Reformation Italy'. In Lynda L. Coon, Katharine J. Haldane and Elisabeth W. Sommer, eds., *That Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia, 1990), 118-133.

51 Cassar, *Daughters of Eve*, 239.

at times when Tridentine reforms and more rigid observance were being introduced, with all the tensions and divisions that this created. The enforcement of stricter enclosure after the Council of Trent affected the way in which the nuns at the monastery of St Peter had to organise their daily lives. Oppositions in male-female relations were intensified by this shift towards stricter monastic enclosure, as was then being insisted upon by the Maltese episcopal authorities in line with the Catholic Reformation. This was aggravated by the concurrent steep rise in the number of women enclosed in the confined spaces of this monastery in Mdina in the early seventeenth century.